

LINCOLN STEFFENS: HE COVERED THE FUTURE

The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler

GRANVILLE HICKS

IN THE spring of 1931, just as it was becoming apparent to all but a few die-hards that prosperity was not around the corner, there appeared *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, possibly the most influential book of the 1930's. Persons my age or a little older—I was in my thirtieth year when the *Autobiography* was published—found in the book a recapitulation of much that we had seen or at any rate known about, and it strengthened convictions we had already formed or were forming. The book's effect on us, however, considerable as it was, was as nothing compared with its effect on younger persons, those in college or just out of it, who had experienced only the expansiveness and extravagance of the 20's. Where we had felt more or less disillusionment with the war and the peace and the fruitlessness of reformist hopes, Versailles and Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom were for them merely words in the history books. The overwhelming fact of their lives was the depression, which compelled them to ask: "How did we get this way? How did we come to

MANY Americans who in the 1930's turned toward a faith in the Russian Revolution and Communism found a special support and comfort in the familiar, home-grown figure of Lincoln Steffens. GRANVILLE HICKS tries here to analyze the remarkable career of that "hard-headed," muckraking American journalist who came to see the Soviet prescription as a sovereign remedy for all our ills. Where and why did Steffens's brand of liberalism go wrong? And, a more important question, is his kind of mistake being made in new contexts? Mr. Hicks, present literary editor of the *New Leader* and former literary editor of the *New Masses*, is the author of several books, including *The Great Tradition* (1933), *Figures of Transition* (1939), and *Small Town* (1946). With Ella Winter, Lincoln Steffens's widow, Mr. Hicks edited Steffens's *Letters*, published by Harcourt, Brace in 1938.

such a pass?" Steffens's answer in the *Autobiography* had the force of revelation.

For nearly forty years he had been a reporter, a muckraker, a student of politics, and as he set forth his experiences in the *Autobiography*, the lesson they taught became obvious: every type of corruption led him straight to big business, to special privilege; what was wrong was "the system." To change the system was the only conceivable cure for our evils.

Actually, Steffens did not in the *Autobiography* preach Communism or any other dogma. To some of us, indeed, his broad-mindedness was annoying. The system must be changed, our ideas and moral standards must be changed, but perhaps, he told us, various kinds of change were possible. Lenin had made one kind of change in Russia, Mussolini had made another in Italy. Perhaps the United States was working out a third way of change in the "new capitalism." We read and we smiled: Steffens himself had made it clear that Mussolini's fascism solved no fundamental problems, and as for the "new capitalism," it had died while the *Autobiography* was on the presses. We knew that Russian Communism was the only practical alternative; and soon after the book was published, Steffens showed that he agreed.

FOR those of us who were well on our way to Communism when the *Autobiography* appeared, the book had one special importance: it showed that there was a strictly American path to Communist conclusions, and even in our alienation from the American social order, this mattered more than perhaps we were ready to admit. Steffens's life was full of traditional American motifs: he had led a Tom Sawyer boyhood; he had gone abroad to study, like Henry Adams and so many of Adams's New England predecessors; he had

been a struggling journalist, and a success. And yet out of all this he came to Communism.

For most people today, when Communism seems so utterly "foreign," Steffens's Americanism presents a problem, indeed the central problem. Recently a college student who was doing a term paper on Steffens wrote to me: "It seems to me that the most important question is why, after he began by loving America and everything it stood for and having come to know it as well as any man could, Steffens should have renounced our system and turned to Communism as the salvation for this country and the world. His life provides a clue to the causes of the appeal of Communism in the United States. . . ."

Steffens had everything Americans are supposed to want—money, prestige, the friendship of the great. And yet he became a Communist in all but party membership. How did it happen?

Many ex-Communists today seek simply to forget their Communist past. Others sometimes seem to imply that anyone who was not a Communist in the depression decade must have had something wrong with him—ignoring the fact that, even if it is better to be wrong for good reasons than right for bad ones, that still does not make wrong right. The only thing to do with a mistake is to understand it, for until it is understood, there is danger that it may be repeated.

IN STEFFENS's lively and charming account of his boyhood and youth, there is not much that we can seize upon as explaining the later course of his life. Somehow, however, as we know from the *Letters*, he became an earnest seeker after wisdom and truth. When he went to Germany for graduate study, he wrote his mother: "There may exist no good, no true, no beautiful and no soul, no higher faculties of the mind, no need of heart and feeling, but if they do or not I shall know soon."*

*Acknowledgement is made to the publisher, Harcourt, Brace, for permission to use the quotations from the *Autobiography* and the *Letters*.

He was, then, a young man in quest of the absolute, and his disillusionment was by no means so amusing as he makes it sound in the *Autobiography*. He traveled from university to university, and only gradually gave up his confidence in Hegelian metaphysics to become, as he thought, an empiricist—but it is significant that when he turned from philosophy to science, it was in the hope of finding a "scientific" basis for ethics.

Forced to give up his researches into scientific ethics in order to earn a living, he became a journalist, and a very good one. But ethical problems remained uppermost in his thinking, and he became obsessed as a journalist with the inadequacy of accepted morality to cope with American politics, where lying, bribery, and other immoral acts, as he discovered, were matters of course. It was a discovery that other journalists had made before him, but Steffens refused to take refuge in the easy cynicism of the average newspaper man—which is, of course, no different from the cynicism of most people who are in the know. He wanted to find ways of eliminating political corruption, and he also wanted to understand it. As his understanding grew, he developed one of his characteristic devices, the use of paradox, and in his writings of the 90's we first find those speculations on the goodness of bad men and the badness of good men that are so frequent in the *Autobiography*. The trick was excellent journalism, but for Steffens it was more than a trick: it was a way of holding irreconcilable facts in suspension.

STEFFENS became a muckraker by accident; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the muckraking movement itself was an accident, one for which he was partly responsible. There was nothing novel about the exposing of evils; as one of Steffens's colleagues, Ray Stannard Baker, was fond of pointing out, the muckrakers could find plenty of precedents in both the Old Testament and the New. In the United States after the Civil War, however, the literature of exposure took on a peculiar tone of urgency, because it was concerned not

only with the denunciation of evils but also with the exploration of mysteries. Three vastly influential books of the late 19th century—Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1880), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and Henry Demarest Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1894)—attempted to describe the revolution that was taking place in the life of the United States. Today we can see readily enough how hopelessly oversimplified their account was; but they did broadcast the disturbing discovery that a few individuals, through the exploitation of the opportunities supposed to be the birthright of every American, had got into strategic positions of great wealth and power, and had managed to bar great masses of their contemporaries from access to opportunity. This was "the system" that had to be fought.

The muckraking movement, which communicated this discovery to large numbers of people, was made possible by the rise of the cheap magazine in the 1890's. Having had a spectacular success on the New York *Evening Post* and the *Commercial Advertiser*, Steffens was invited in 1901 to become managing editor of one of the most popular of these new magazines, *McClure's*. His first job was an exposure of corruption in St. Louis; in the issue of *McClure's* that carried his second article, "The Shame of Minneapolis," appeared an installment of Ida Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company* and Ray Stannard Baker's "The Right to Work." The muckraking movement had begun, though it was not to find its name until Theodore Roosevelt supplied it, derisively, in 1906.

It was a triumph of popular journalism, spreading from *McClure's* into rival magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Everybody's*, *Collier's*, and, after Steffens and some of his associates on *McClure's* had taken it over, the *American*. Many other magazines took up the idea before the vogue began to decline in 1911 or 1912. Upton Sinclair charged in *The Brass Check* that muckraking was deliberately suppressed, and there is something in this charge, but it must also be said that muckraking simply wore itself out

as journalistic fashions will. The early muckrakers documented their exposures with considerable care, but sensationalists moved into the field, and the public got tired. Furthermore, some of the muckrakers themselves, including Steffens, began to question the value of what they were doing. Steffens eventually was to become convinced that it had accomplished nothing. "Take it from me," he wrote in the 30's: "muckraking leads to entertainment, not to action. It's the other way around. Action leads to information." He took the same attitude, according to Charles Edward Russell, when he and Russell met in Paris after the First World War. Russell, on the other hand, attributed many specific reforms to muckraking: pure food and drug laws, the direct election of Senators, regulations providing greater safety in railroad travel, and so on. He argued further that Steffens's articles had themselves had great effect, and urged him to go back and have a look at Minneapolis. "There hasn't been a particle of change," Steffens said. "If I were to go back now, I'd find everything exactly the same."

IN THE beginning, however, Steffens had no doubts about the effectiveness of what he was doing. He worked hard to get the facts, he wrote clearly and persuasively, and he believed that his readers would respond to his challenge. In his introduction to the first collection of his articles, *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), he wrote: "The real triumph of the year's work was the complete demonstration it has given, in a thousand little ways, that our shamelessness is superficial, that beneath it lies a pride which, being real, may save us yet. . . . We Americans may have failed. We may be mercenary and selfish. Democracy with us may be impossible and corruption inevitable, but these articles, if they have proved nothing else, have demonstrated beyond doubt that we can stand the truth; that there is pride in the character of American citizenship; and that this pride may be a power in the land." His second book, *The Struggle for Self-Government* (1906), he introduced with an ironic

dedication to the Czar of Russia, informing him that he need not fear to grant his subjects representative government, free speech, a free press, education, and the suffrage. "For have I not shown, Sire, that we, the great American people, have all that we want of all these things, and that, nevertheless, our government differs from yours—in essentials—not so much as you thought, not so much as your people think, and not nearly so much as my people think?" This, of course, was principally a way of pricking that American pride to which the earlier introduction had alluded. In *The Upbuilders* (1908) Steffens employed direct exhortation: "Wherever the people have found a leader who was loyal to them; brave; and not too far ahead, there they have followed him, and there has begun the solution of our common problem; the problem of the cities, states, and nations—the problem of civilized living in human communities."

These three introductions are the closest thing we have to a formal statement of Steffens's political views in his muckraking period. They all express a belief that the majority of the people will exercise their political rights honestly and intelligently if they are given the truth and if they have the proper kind of leadership. Actually, however, his views were undergoing a change during these years. In the *Autobiography* he says that as early as 1904 he had reached these conclusions: "Political corruption is not a matter of men or classes or education or character of any sort; it is a matter of pressure. Wherever the pressure is brought to bear, society and government cave in. The problem, then, is one of dealing with the pressure, of discovering and dealing with the cause or the source of the pressure to buy and corrupt." "But," he continues, "I did not, I could not, write that yet. I still believed, and my readers still believed, that there were some kinds of men that would neither buy nor sell and that the job was to get such men into power."

Obviously Steffens was coming close to socialism, and he was not unaware of that fact. In 1908 he laid some of his ideas be-

fore Theodore Roosevelt in a letter, and Roosevelt replied that what he was advocating amounted to socialism, adding, "What is needed is the *fundamental fight for morality*." Steffens answered: "You point ahead to Socialism, and it may well be that we shall have to go that far. If we do, to get things right, then I, for one, should be willing to go there."

That same year Steffens did an article on Eugene Debs, the Socialist candidate for President, and Debs commented: "You have written from and have been inspired by a social brain, a social heart and a social conscience and if you are not a Socialist I do not know one." Steffens summed it all up in a letter to his sister: "As for Socialism, I certainly am socialistic, but I'm not yet a Socialist."

WHEN he had finished with muckraking, Steffens tried his hand as a practical reformer in Boston, with the idea of combining the resources of the good bad men and the bad good men. One is surprised, not that the idea failed but that its failure surprised Steffens. Even more extraordinarily, he emerged as an advocate of applied Christianity. "I have come up out of the muck," he wrote in *Everybody's* for December 1911, "believing that Christianity will work; that we can trust mankind; that liberty and reason, education and patience and kindness; in brief, that faith, hope, and charity would save the world. And I mean now. I mean right here in the United States in this year of our Lord, 1911. I believe that Christianity is a practical theory of social conduct."

In view of what we know about Steffens's thinking at the time, it would be hard to take this passage at face value, and there is a letter that he wrote to his sister about the article in which it appeared: "I wrote it all with a smile on my mind, and sometimes I laughed out loud." So Steffens's tongue was in his cheek. But was it? Readers of the *Autobiography* will remember that it discusses with perfect seriousness his experiments in Christianity. ("I preached Christianity, and the effect was a shock to the

congregation.") Moreover, there was the McNamara case.

J. J. and J. B. McNamara, members of the International Association of Bridge and Iron Workers, were charged with having dynamited the building of the Los Angeles *Times*, causing the death of twenty-one persons. Clarence Darrow was conducting their defense, and the entire labor movement was strongly supporting them in their plea of innocence. Then Steffens told the McNamara brothers that if they would plead guilty, he would try to make the industrialists of Los Angeles understand why labor resorted to violence, and would appeal to them to show a Christian spirit of mercy. The McNamaras confessed and, according to his version of the story, Steffens did succeed in convincing the businessmen, but on the following Sunday the ministers preached against the McNamaras, and the judge, swayed by the public sentiment thus aroused, imposed vindictive sentences. No two accounts of the case agree, but some of the results of Steffens's intervention are undeniable: the McNamara brothers spent long terms in jail, as did two other men who were later convicted of a share in the dynamiting; Clarence Darrow was twice tried for perjury; the entire labor movement was seriously embarrassed; Job Harriman, Socialist candidate for mayor of Los Angeles, who had seemed certain of victory, was thoroughly beaten; plans for a labor truce in Los Angeles came to nothing.

Had Steffens seriously believed that Christianity would "work"? It seems unlikely. Just after the settlement he wrote his sister: "What I am really up to is to make people think. . . . And every time I can confront the busy world with what it thinks it thinks, I do it. The McNamara incident was simply a very successful stroke in this policy. It was like a dynamite explosion. It hurt; it may have killed some and it may land me in Coventry if not in San Quentin. But it has made people think." And a week later, writing from New York, he urged his sister to "remember that if I don't win, I shall be in a good position to say and carry my conclusion that Christianity will *not* work, not under

present conditions. I've got them either way and all I have to do is to watch and report developments."

Both the *Autobiography* and the *Letters* show that Steffens was shocked and hurt by the resentment his action aroused, especially among persons who had been his good friends. He staunchly supported Darrow in the perjury trials, and he did his best to secure pardons for the McNamaras and for Matthew Schmidt, one of the later victims. But he never admitted that he had made a mistake, never seemed to feel that there was anything reprehensible in his having risked lives and causes to prove that Christianity wouldn't work, to "make people think."

Still Steffens hesitated to declare himself a revolutionary. He was out of favor now: the public had lost interest in muckraking, and editors, paradoxically, regarded his part in the McNamara case as evidence of radicalism. Personally as well he was at loose ends, for his wife had died early in 1911. But instead of becoming an active radical, he was content to sit back and "watch and report developments."

IN THE summer of 1914 Steffens went to Europe with a group of millionaires. It was not an important trip for him, but it provides the occasion for one of the crucial chapters of the *Autobiography*. In the long section on muckraking, Steffens has already demonstrated that reform won't work in America; then he has shown the failure of Christianity. Now, in reporting on this brief expedition shortened by the onset of war, he can say that all European countries are in the same situation as the United States, only at more advanced stages of decay. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, and that, in 1914, he felt he couldn't state: "How be heard saying that the process of political corruption we were reforming here and there was a mighty force that was, in Europe, making for the control of trade routes, spheres of influence, empire, war, and that the cost of war, economically and morally, would precipitate the revolution, which alone could change our course and our minds and save

us?" He couldn't say that in 1914, but in 1931 he could.

What the reader of the *Autobiography* in 1931 was not likely to notice was that Steffens arrived at this generalization on the basis of very little evidence. When he was muckraking the American cities, he had come to believe that he would find the same forces at work in each, and his investigation seemed to prove him right. I have an idea now that there was less uniformity than he thought there was, but the fact remains that he did a careful study of each place he discussed, and even if his generalizations were extravagant, his factual account of what was going on was largely dependable. In Europe, on the other hand, he did not have to look, for he knew exactly what he would see.

This is important, for it reveals the pattern of Steffens's reporting from this time on. When the war broke out, he tells us, he was interested only in revolution, and so he went to Mexico to see how a revolution worked. He knew exactly what was going to happen, and of course it did: Carranza failed to "abolish privileges and close up the sources of corruption," and so the revolution failed. When he went to Kerensky's Russia in the spring of 1917, he again knew what he was going to see, and he saw it.

And it was just so when he visited Lenin's Russia two years later. Steffens talked with the Communist leaders, especially Lenin, and they said the things he had hoped they would say. He summed it up:

"The only idea that I could make my own was this that my muckraking had brought me to:

"Soviet Russia was a revolutionary government with an evolutionary plan. Their plan was, not by direct action to resist such evils as poverty and riches, graft, privilege, tyranny, and war, but to seek out and remove the causes of them. They were not practicing what we and they preached. They were not trying to establish political democracy, legal liberty, and negotiated peace—not now. They were at present only laying a basis for these good things. They had set up a dictatorship, supported by a small, trained

minority, to make and maintain for a few generations a scientific arrangement of economic forces which would result in economic democracy first and political democracy last.

"It was a new culture, an economic, scientific, not a moral culture. And the Russians we were conversing with, the heads of the Soviet government, were talking out of a new philosophy. No wonder it was confusing and difficult."

Of course it was not in the least confusing or difficult to Steffens. The Soviet leaders were talking his language, and when they weren't, he could put the words in their mouth. His expectations were confirmed. In Soviet Russia, as he was to say so often, he had seen "the Future," and it "worked." What could he actually have seen in a few days in a country involved in civil war? But his claim to have seen with his own eyes a "real" revolution gave an air of authority to his pronouncements, and it bolstered his image of himself as one who arrived at decisions only on the basis of concrete evidence.

Once more, however, Steffens refused to become an active revolutionary. Some of his young friends, disillusioned by the Treaty of Versailles and excited by what he reported to them about the Russian Revolution, asked him what they should do. This, according to the *Autobiography*, is what he told them: "Either they and we all should labor to change the foundation of society, as the Russians were doing, or go along with the resultant civilization we were part of, taking care only to save our minds by seeing it all straight and thinking about it clearly." His age, his temperament, a young wife and, in time, a baby impelled him to choose for himself the latter course. He spent the 20's in France and Italy, thinking, watching, and enjoying life. His only important publication in those years was *Moses in Red*, a parable of the revolution defending dictatorship and the terror.

BUT during those years, when his name had almost been forgotten in America, Steffens was first meditating upon and then

writing the book that was to make him as famous and as influential in the 30's as he had been in the muckraking decade. The chief purpose of the *Autobiography* was to report his two great discoveries: first, that corruption was inherent in the "system" and that reform was therefore impossible; second, that the Russian Revolution showed us our way of salvation. This second point he stated explicitly, but he confused the issue, for many readers, by saying not only that he had seen the Future in Russia and that it worked but also that he had seen Mussolini and Mussolini worked, and furthermore that he had seen the new capitalism—and it worked.

How much he meant by all these qualifications is not easy to determine. Most of the *Autobiography* was written while America was prospering—it was finished in the summer of 1930—and even if he had not had the failure of *Moses in Red* to remind him, Steffens would have known that this was no time to preach Communist revolution. Moreover, his own role, as he portrayed it in the book, was that of the skeptic, the hard-headed searcher for truth, and he could not afford to expose himself as a dogmatist. Besides, he still thought of himself as a man who was open to new ideas.

If one reads carefully, however, one realizes that Steffens was making only minor concessions. What the case of Mussolini proved was that the Bolshevik technique of revolution could be employed by the right as well as the left; but, Steffens was careful to point out, Mussolini had borrowed Lenin's methods without borrowing his aims; his revolution was a challenge to liberalism, but it was doomed to failure.

His attitude toward the new capitalism offers a more difficult problem. His letters show that he was honestly impressed by the achievements of mass production when he returned to the United States in 1927. He saw not only new methods of production but also the progress of scientific research in industry, and a shift of control into the hands of the young managers rather than the old financiers. Early in 1929 he wrote

Jo Davidson: "Really, Jo, the unconscious experiment this country is making in civilization and culture is equal to that of Soviet Russia. The race is saved one way or the other and, I think, both ways. . . . Big business in America is producing what the Socialists held up as their goal; food, shelter and clothing for all." This seems forthright enough, but elsewhere Steffens makes it clear that what he saw in the new capitalism was a process by which business was taking over government, whereas in a "real" revolution government took over business. Government by business might work for a time, but in the long run Steffens expected it to be superseded by "the" revolution.

In other words, what he wrote in the *Autobiography* about the new capitalism was a mere pretense of open-mindedness. When he began his muckraking, Steffens believed that it was his mission to give the people the truth. But increasingly, as he so frankly admits, he came to feel that the people could not take the whole truth, and by the time he wrote the *Autobiography* he had fully formed the habit of telling his readers only so much of the truth as he thought it was good for them to know. He was, in effect, anticipating the "Popular Front" of the 30's, whose "leaders" pretended to beliefs they did not really hold in order to bring the "masses" closer to their real goals. And like the men of the "Popular Front," Steffens did not necessarily understand the implications of what he was doing.

IN ANY case, once the *Autobiography* was published, Steffens felt ready to throw off the guise of ironic detachment, and began openly to preach Russian Communism. Nothing shook his faith. When the executions began after the assassination of Kirov, he wrote calmly that Russia had become liberal too fast and that the reinstitution of the Terror was absolutely necessary. And in a letter that he sent to be read at a Communist party rally in San Francisco in 1934, he said: "Communism can solve our problem. Communism does solve our problem—in Soviet Russia. That's my muckraker's procla-

mation; that the American Communist Party program meets our American capitalist situation precisely, and it is the only American party that meets it—head on: all of it: the political corruption, the poverty and plenty, the periodic depressions of business—all our troubles; and proposes to solve them at any cost. . . .”

It should not be hard to imagine what such a statement meant to persons like myself, who were not, as is usually supposed, miraculously certain about the Communism to which they had committed themselves but, on the contrary, were constantly carrying on a rearguard action against a swarm of doubts. Steffens's assurance cleared away the doubts like a blast of machine gun fire, for he was our wise man and he had seen the Future with his own eyes. And the younger people, for whom the *Autobiography* was the one true map of the American economic wilderness, regarded his words as marching orders—and they marched, a lot of them, straight into the party.

To the undergraduate who wrote me recently about the *Autobiography*, it appears that Steffens should have been inoculated against Communism by love of country and faith in “our system,” and the two things are closely associated in her mind. Today, when the conflict that divides the world is, in one of its aspects, a struggle between Russian and American nationalism, acceptance of Communism seems to be incompatible with any kind of patriotic sentiment. Yet my own principal venture in Communist propaganda was called, in all sincerity, *I Like America*; and the slogan “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism” had great propaganda value in its day just because most of the new Communist recruits and fellow-travelers were consciously devoted to their native land.

The issue was not patriotism, but “our system.” By that, I take it, my correspondent means an amorphous complex of ideas, of which democratic government and free enterprise are two elements. Steffens, on the other hand, meant by the system just one thing: the private ownership of the means

of production. It was responsible, he believed, for all our economic, political, and social evils, and these evils could be cured only if the system was changed. To desire to change the system, therefore, was not only compatible with love of country; it was the highest patriotism.

Actually, it was not patriotism that should have inoculated Steffens—and all of us—against Communism in the 30's, but liberalism. And many liberals, to be sure, did remain firm; but many others went over to Communism, and their conversion can only be regarded as a failure of liberalism or what currently passed by that name. The failure may become more comprehensible if we understand what happened to Lincoln Steffens.

IF THERE is one clear pattern in Steffens's thinking, it is his search for a solution. Although he soon lost the faith in absolute truth that he held when he began his studies in Germany, he never lost a kind of absolutist impatience. It never seems to have occurred to him that the struggle for good government might be unending. Like the good journalist who finishes one story and goes on to the next, or like the scientist who clears away numerous false hypotheses before he comes to the right solution, Steffens “eliminated” one social solution after another—muckraking, municipal reform, Christianity. But there had to be a solution.

Of course he was right in rejecting the conventional notion that the evils of politics can be explained simply in terms of bad men, but he was betrayed by his desire to solve the problem once and for all. In the story of Adam and Eve, which he often used in lectures and repeated in the *Autobiography*, he put the blame for original sin not on Adam, not on Eve, not on Satan, but on the apple. The trouble, he insisted, was “it”—the system. That Adam, Eve, Satan, and the apple might all be guilty, in various ways and perhaps in different degrees, was an idea he never entertained. By blaming the apple alone, he left no ground for moral judgment or even for moral speculation, and

the result of that was, not that he got away from the making of moral judgments—he was always making such judgments, just as Marx and Lenin were—but that his bases of judgment were exempted from that process of constant examination and reexamination which alone can keep morality sweet.

By 1908 Steffens was convinced that all political evils could be traced to the system; by 1913 or 1914 he had accepted the Marxist idea of revolution; in 1919 he saw "the Future." His constant use of that phrase is terribly revealing: he believed that the shape of the future was already determined, that he knew what it was going to be, that he could recognize it when he saw it. Liberty, Lenin said, will come in two or three generations, and Steffens believed him. Other men, such as Bertrand Russell, went to Russia and guessed that the future would be something like what now exists, a constantly worsening tyranny. But Steffens brushed Russell off: "Russell is the most amazing failure to get it."

In the writings of some of Steffens's contemporaries—such as Russell, Morris Cohen, John Dewey—one finds a liberalism that is genuinely pluralistic and experimental. (It is well not to forget this; those whose "re-examination" of liberalism has led them only to other orthodoxies, other "solutions," are closer to Lincoln Steffens than they think.) However, the ordinary liberalism of the market place and the forum had a simple faith in the powers of reason, and tended to believe that social problems could be "solved." The liberal of the 20's was proud of his willingness to listen to other people's solutions, though as a rule he had solutions of his own; but it was in terms of solutions that he customarily thought, not in terms of a never-ending, many-sided struggle with a multiform and constantly changing reality.

IT WOULD be easy to say that much of what was called liberalism in the 20's and earlier did not deserve the name, that it was near-socialism or some other kind of quasi-

radicalism, but I doubt that such an excursion into semantics would be profitable. It is better to take liberalism as we find it, recognizing that there are many varieties, and then say that by and large the liberalism that prevailed in the United States from 1900 to 1930 was too uncritical, too inflexible, and too unimaginative to cope with the complex realities of contemporary society. Hence many liberals, when confronted with a major economic and political crisis, had nothing with which to resist the appeal of a system of absolutes such as Communism.

The observation is pointed up by the case of Lincoln Steffens, who was in many ways so much more critical, flexible, and imaginative than most of his contemporaries. The case is the more significant because it is impossible to explain Steffens away in terms of personal interests or psychological compulsions. You cannot even say that he was panicked into Communism, for he was a Communist long before the depression. You have to grant that he came to Communism by using his mind, and that fact, from our present position and with our present perspective, serves to remind us how fallible an instrument the human mind can be.

The case of Lincoln Steffens is worth reviewing today, not as a warning against Communism—nothing could be less necessary than that—but as a warning against a type of mind that did not die in 1936, or 1939, or 1945. The quest for certainty is being carried on today with acute, and understandable, eagerness. Its more obvious forms are on the conservative side: the return to religious dogma, the recrudescence of *laissez-faire*, hysterical "Americanism." But there are also panaceas with liberal labels, and although most of the rank-and-file liberals, after burning their fingers in Stalin's fire, have learned to be skeptical, it is not so certain that they have learned to be critical in any bold, imaginative way. We are not likely to make Steffens's particular mistake, but who will say that we are safe from his kind of mistake?